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Sharing your scholarship while avoiding the predators: Guidelines for medical physicists interested in open access publishing

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GUEST EDITORIAL

The number of for-profit journals in our field supported by author fees has grown rapidly, a business model with the potential to create perverse incentives for publishing papers of questionable quality. To aid our readers in distinguishing legitimate from predatory open-access venues, we have invited Ms. Meredith Kahn, Publishing Services & Outreach Librarian at the University of Michigan Library, to share her experience on this issue in the following Guest editorial.

Jeffrey F. Williamson, Editor-in-Chief

Sharing your scholarship while avoiding the predators: Guidelines for medical physicists interested in open access publishing

As a librarian who works for an academic publisher, I often hear from faculty members and colleagues who have received appeals to serve on editorial boards of journals they have never heard of, unsolicited requests to submit manuscripts to dubious publications, and suspect invitations to generic-sounding conferences in exotic locales. Collectively, this activity is often described as "predatory" publishing, as its primary objective is to generate revenue rather than further scholarship.

You have likely received such entreaties yourself, and there are a number of reasons it is important for authors to be able to distinguish between legitimate and spurious publication venues. In order for your work to be accessible to colleagues, practitioners, and others who might benefit from it or build upon it in the service of new knowledge, you need to find trusted channels for distribution. Avoiding illegitimate conferences and journals has become an increasingly important part of this process. In addition, reputation is the currency of the academy, and keeping your scholarship out of disreputable venues helps ensure that your own name and work remain in good standing.

When considering publication venues, note that predatory come-ons have recognizable features. They often arrive in your inbox unsolicited, directly from a conference organizer or journal publisher, typically poorly written. In the case of a conference, it is often one of a series of meetings with vague descriptions that cover a curiously broad array of subjects. These meetings often have names that are similar to an existing and well-known professional organization's annual event. Messages regarding journals share many of the same features. Again, suspect journals often have a name very similar to an existing journal, and are one of many titles in a range of subjects covered by one large publisher. In addition, these journals often note that they will accept previously published work or provide unrealistic timelines for peer review and production.

A cursory examination of the conference or journal website often reveals that the organizer or publisher uses a similar template for many different meetings or publications, with minor variations on each site. Key information is often missing or vague, such as location and registration information, or the names and affiliations of editorial board members. There is often no information on how material will be vetted, or deadlines for submissions. Frequently, the site does not appear to be professionally designed, has numerous typos, and dead links. Checking the domain name using a "whois" lookup service indicates that it is registered to an individual or a limited liability company rather than a recognized professional organization or society.

Looking for the features described above can help you avoid being duped. The Open Access Scholarly Publishers Association (OASPA) has a long list of best practices (http://oaspa.org/principles-of-transparency-and-best-practice-in-scholarly-publishing/) that journal publishers and editors can follow in order to make their publications easy for you to evaluate. As an author, you can use the OASPA criteria to help you think critically when considering a particular journal. In addition, you can take the following actions:

Be exceedingly wary of unsolicited calls for proposals sent to you via email. Reputable journals and conferences do not make cold calls.

Do not agree to submit manuscripts to, review submissions for, or join the editorial board of a journal you are not intimately familiar with. Speak to editors, other authors, and staff to determine if a journal or conference is legitimate. If questions about peer review or selection criteria, fees, business models, or organizational affiliation cannot be answered, consider the entity suspect.

Fact check any claims made by the publisher or conference organizer. If they list someone as a member of their editorial board, confirm that with the person in question. If they claim an impact factor or inclusion in a disciplinary index, independently confirm those details.

Make sure your own professional online presence is accurate and up to date. Having correct information about yourself on a departmental, institutional, or personal website is the best way to combat having your name appear on disreputable journal editorial boards or conference sites. Make it easier for others to perform the kind of due diligence described above.

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Practice "herd immunity." Talk to your colleagues about how to avoid being duped by predatory publishers, as these publishers typically trick unsuspecting academics—sometimes even respected, senior scholars—into recruiting colleagues for suspect editorial boards or soliciting their own networks for article submissions.

When in doubt about the authenticity of a journal or conference, talk to a librarian. Academic librarians are experts at finding and evaluating information. Science librarians and medical librarians combine this knowledge with expertise in an academic discipline, which gives them even greater insight into the problem of sorting legitimate from illegitimate publication venues.

The best defense against predatory publishing is knowledge of the respected publication venues in your field. Making a determination about the quality of a journal or conference requires time and effort, and should not be relegated to simple lists of "good" or "bad" actors. Newness, experimentation, or an open access orientation are not what makes a journal or a conference "predatory." Rather, it is a mission that fails to prioritize the advancement of scholarship.

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